

Worldly World Music

Two local orchestras play on the edge with *gamelan*, *koto*, and *er-hu*. BY GAVIN BORCHERT

AS COMPOSERS BEGAN to realize, back around 1960, that 12-tone Serialism (à la Webern) was not going to be quite

SEATTLE CREATIVE ORCHESTRA
Greenlake United Methodist Church, Oct 25

SEATTLE PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA
Meany Hall, October 26

the panacea its supporters claimed, they quickly sought other areas to explore. Minimalism, chance music, and group improvisation all found enthusiasts. Yet others developed an interest in non-European instruments and styles, inspired by the work of a few pioneers such as Colin McPhee, Lou Harrison, and Henry Cowell. The sonic experiments of these composers drew them East, to the chiming colors and rhythms of the Indonesian *gamelan*, the undiscovered array of Chinese instruments and alternative tuning systems. Such pioneering work made possible the international palette of sounds heard this weekend from the Seattle Creative Orchestra and the Seattle Philharmonic Orchestra, two groups with a keen interest in furthering con-

temporary music.

Cowell's music is of particular interest to composers Christopher Shainin and Jarrad Powell, founders of the year-old Seattle Creative Orchestra. On the SCO's chamber-music concert last weekend, four of the six works, including Cowell's *Persian Set*, brought together Western and non-Western instruments. (The other two were Frances White's lovely *Winter aconites*, a nearly stationary mobile of suspended tones recalling its dedicatee John Cage, and Chinariy Ung's *Tall Wind*, economically written but ripe with the bleep-bloops of academic modernism.)

In *A Tree in Foreign Soil*, Jeffrey Lependorf combined the *shakuhachi* (Japanese bamboo flute) with harp, marimba, vibraphone, and string sextet. It was perfectly at home among the extended techniques (themselves often inspired by non-Western sounds) of 20th-century music: harmonics, bowed percussion, string pitch-bending. Lependorf gave the flute a timbral and stylistic context in which it was no longer an exotic spice, but beautiful and effective on its own terms.

JOSEPH CURIALE, THOUGH, might have treated the *er-hu* (Chinese two-string fiddle) with a little more solicitude, not to say taste. His was one of two works—both concertos for non-Western instruments and orchestra—premiered under Marsha Mabrey's baton by the Seattle Philharmonic the next afternoon. *Gates of Gold* was unbelievably soundtracky, though its weird combination of the 1,300-year-old *er-hu* with the acme of slick musical Hollywoodism does have precedents: those Socialist-Realist concertos-by-committee produced during the Cultural Revolution and the Muzak played at the Chinese diner down the block from my apartment.

In *African Hands* by Regina Harris Baiocchi, Ruben Alvarez coaxed a variety of timbres from his four drums, at one point producing sustained sounds by rubbing on the drumheads. The drums, though they easily cut through the orchestral texture, more often spoke alone, providing sage and dignified utterances. Baiocchi's orchestral writing was finely wrought, aggressive and crunchy with still an edge to the lyrical passages. The all-too-brief work was a success, and I'd have been happy to have it twice as long. ■